

## Tribute to dear Shobha

I first met Shobha Bhagwat in 1978 at the Indian Institute of Education (IIE) Pune. This was 5 years before the Garware Bal Bhavan was set up. I had taken leave from Telco and gone for a year to work with the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (HSTP). The friends at HSTP told me to meet Prof. Krishna Kumar in Pune who worked at the Indian Institute of Education (IIE) set up by Prof. J. P. Naik. That's where I first met Shobha Tai. That first meeting is clearly etched in my mind.

How empathetic or compassionate a society is can be measured by how it treats its most vulnerable people – its senior citizens and its children. The elderly still have a vote in the elections; children don't even have that. Political parties often formulate schemes to help the elderly, but seldom for children. Children are politically invisible and powerless.

A hundred years back Gijubhai Badheka wrote:

Tell me

Where shall I play?

Where shall I jump?

To whom shall I talk?

When I talk my mummy feels interrupted,

When I play my daddy is irritated,

When I jump, I am told to sit down,

When I sing, I am told to be quiet,

Tell me, where shall I go, what shall I do?

What Gijubhai wrote a hundred years back became the prime reason for setting up the Garware Bal Bhavan. Here children could live out their childhood doing interesting activities in a secure environment. Today with both parents working they don't have enough time to spare for their children. Many homes have just a single child. Many children have no siblings to play with. In a secure place like the Bal Bhavan children get to play with other children and this leads to greater socialization of the children. Children play together, sing together, laugh together. Three generations of children have played at the Bal Bhavan. Pune is singularly lucky to have a dynamic place like the Garware Bal Bhavan. I lived in New Delhi for 14 years. It had the National Bal Bhavan, but you would hardly find any children there. The Garware Bal Bhavan came into existence and thrived because of the passion of one individual – Shobha Tai. She considered all the Tais as her own daughters. Shobha took the Tais to different NGOs and cities so they got a wider exposure and learnt the best practices. Shobha treated the Tais with great love and affection. The Garware Bal Bhavan always had a

larger vision – multi-religious prayers were held here. It was an inclusive organization with embraced children of different socio-economic backgrounds, abilities, religions etc. Many children who come to Bal Bhavan had personal problems. Children came here with many biases and problems but while playing with other children of their age, many of their problems got automatically sorted out and solved.

In 1980 I had read a book titled *Divaswapna* written by Gijubhai Badheka. I had never read such a wonderful book on education in the Indian context. I gave a copy to Shobha to read. She loved it. Tarabai Modak was Gijubhai's student, and Anutai Wagh was Tarabai's student. Shobha translated *Divaswapna* in Marathi. It was a very simple and readable translation. For two years we went to many publishers. They asked us, "Is it prescribed in the B.Ed. course? Otherwise, who will buy it?" Pune was called the Oxford of the East. But in reality, we encountered a very callous attitude. It was the visionary Sri Anil Bordia -Education Secretary who came to our rescue. He was perhaps the most well read and progressive Education Secretary we ever had. Sri Bordia had read *Divaswapna* in Hindi and was very fond of it. He went back to Delhi and sent One Lakh rupees to Dr. Chitra Naik - Director of the IIE, Pune. That's how *Divaswapna* got published in Marathi. The first print order was 35,000 copies! Thanks to the IIE, this classic in Education is still in print and priced very nominally at just Rs. 20/-.

In 2003, when I returned to Pune after spending 14 years in New Delhi, Shobha wrote an article on me in the Diwali Special issue of *Saptahik Sakal* titled *Khelnichya Jadugar*. It came out in Oct 2003, just when I joined the children's science center at IUCAA. This popular article was read by lakhs of people. Dr. Vidula Mhaikar and Ashok Rupner came to me because they read the article. I will remain eternally grateful to Shobha, for getting me such amazing colleagues.

Thus started my collaboration with Shobha on reprinting educational classics. Another book was *Priya Bai* (English *Letter to a Teacher* – School of Barbiana, Italy). The very first line of the book said, "School is a war against the poor." Sudha Kulkarni ji had translated in the 1980s and it was first published in Marathi by Granthali. Granthali never reprinted it. Sudhaji was kind enough to give me permission to reprint her translation. She was very happy to see book reprinted after lapse of 30 years. So, Bal Bhavan reprinted *Priya Bai*. On the back cover was a blurb by Pu La Deshpande, "This year I read many good books. But this little booklet on education gave me sleepless nights." (Ya varshi mee nirnirali pustaken vachli. Pan ha chimuklya pustak ne majhi jhop udavli). This 2-line blurb by Pu La was enough to catapult *Priya Bai* in the big league of progressive books in education. After that I gave Shobha *Bahuroop Gandhi* by Anu Bandopadhyaya. Illustrated by the great R. K. Laxman and published by the NCERT this remains the finest book on Gandhiji for children ever written. In the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan launched by the government, you might have noticed a picture where Gandhiji is sweeping the floor with a broom. This picture has been taken from *Bahuroop Gandhi*. Shobha translated this lovely book into Marathi. In the 1990s, I was associated with the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS). They translated many world class children's books into Hindi. They published a set of 100 books titled *Bal Vachan* which sold over 20-lakh copies in Hindi. Bal Bhavan translated and published around 20 BGVS books in

Marathi. Bal Bhavan became a niche publisher, and published quality children's books at a very affordable price. Shobha also translated a very beautiful African book for children titled *Gaon Ka Bachcha* by Jane Cowen Fletcher in Marathi. This amazingly illustrated book has a very powerful message, "To bring up a child, you don't need just the parents, family, or the neighborhood but you actually need the entire village!"

I have two humble suggestions. When the Garware Bal Bhavan completed 25 years, Shobha had penned the story of the Bal Bhavan. We translated that inspiring experience into Hindi titled *Khushaal Bachche*. Now Bal Bhavan is more than 40 years old. Many more enriching experiences need to be added to update that book. The complete Bal Bhavan experience will help many.

Around 2016 when Shobha's health started to fail then I requested Dr. Vidula Mhaikar that we must get a film made on Shobha's inspiring life and journey. Sameer Shipurkar made a beautiful documentary on Shobha and also the Garware Bal Bhavan. We must transcribe Shobha's own words spoken in the documentary into a booklet and publish it with pictures of the Tais and the happy children at Bal Bhavan.

In the end I will say that whenever and where ever you see happy, smiling children, whenever you see children laughing boisterously, whenever you see a gleam in the eyes of children, you will always catch a glimpse of Shobha. She lived to make children smile!!

Arvind Gupta

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